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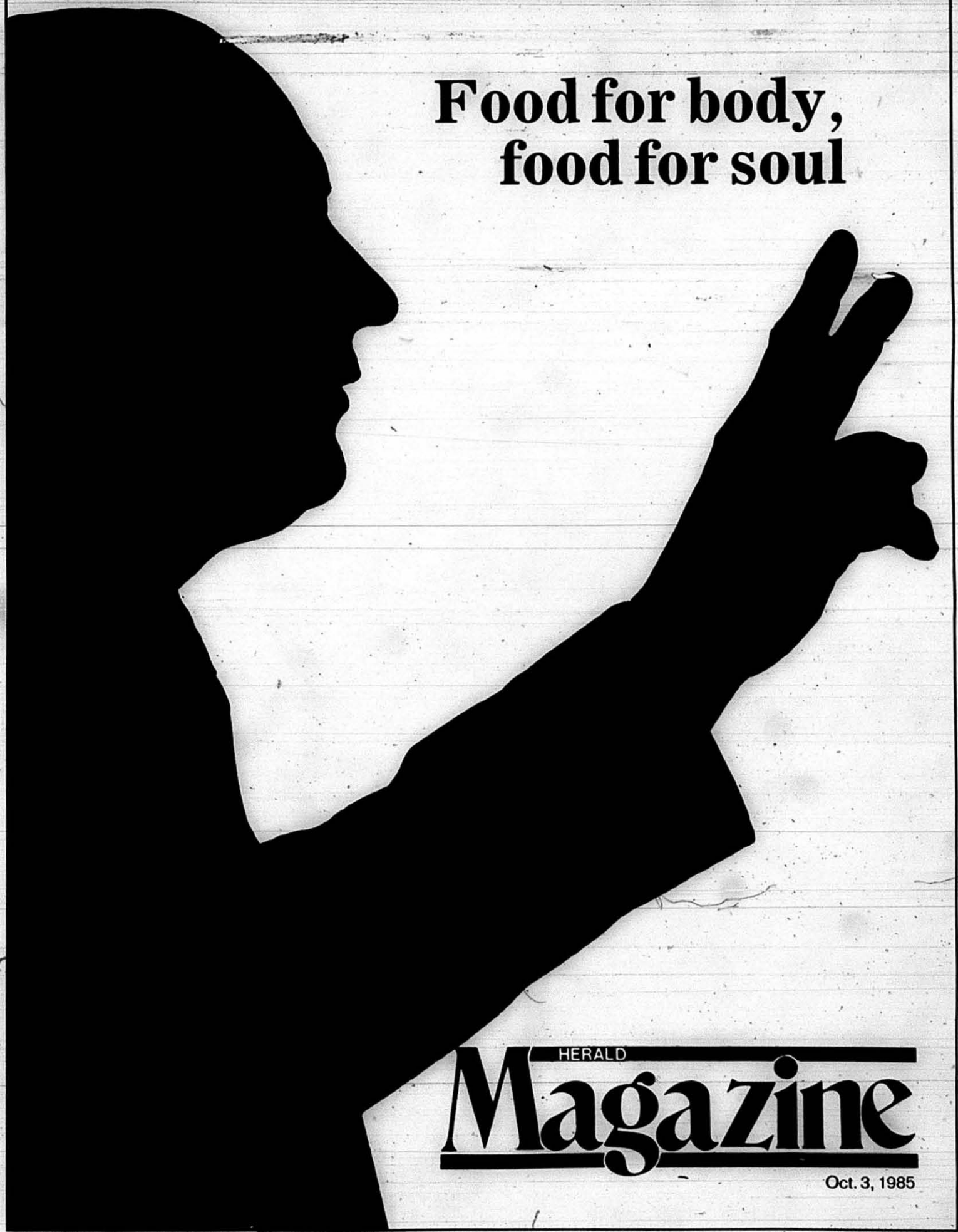
Food for body, food for soul



HERALD
Magazine
Oct. 3, 1985

HERALD
Magazine

Beneath Bowling Green — Chemicals are collecting in the caves beneath Bowling Green, and Western students are among those trying to discover the source. Story, Page 3.

Story by MACK HUMPREYS Photos by STEVE HANKS

Food, for body, food for soul — Louis Cook is the director of Food Services, but he also dishes out spiritual nourishment as minister of the Smiths Grove Church of Christ.

Cover photo illustration by James Borchuck. Story, Page 6.

Story by VICTORIA P. MALMER Photos by JAMES BORCHUCK

Coming home — Bob Dalton Buster was in Vietnam for 10 months — long enough to scar him physically and emotionally for years. He's learning to face the memories as he writes a manuscript about his experiences. Story, Page 9.

Story by STEVE THOMAS Photos by T.J. HAMILTON

Editor
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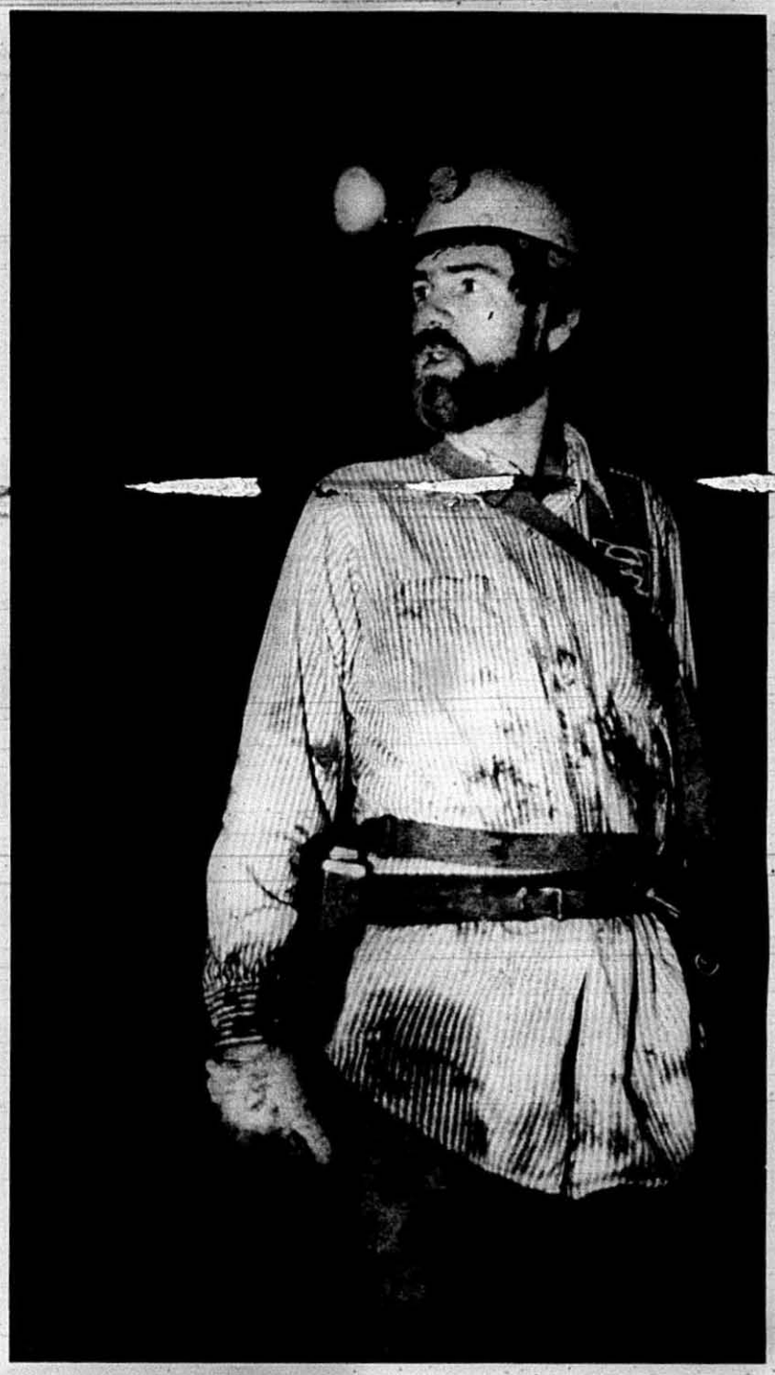
Photo Editor
T.J. HAMILTON

Surveyors search for chemicals and connections in the Lost River cave system...

Beneath Bowling Green



Dust swirled in the piercing light from the miner's helmet.

An underground stream murmured just beyond the wall, and far above, a swimming pool dripped chlorine water into the cave.

Farther down in the cave, the rock floor turned to thick mud. Woodrow Thomas's boots broke the mud, leaving his tracks. The irritating smell of petroleum rose through the air.

"These caves are fragile. They're not just holes in the ground," said Thomas, president of Green River Grotto, the local chapter of the National Speleological Society.

"Some of the petroleum smell is natural," he said, because of natural oil deposits. Often, though, chemicals dumped by industries and people create the smells that pervade Bowling Green caves.

Entrances to the caves are throughout the city — in back yards and near businesses. That brings the chemicals close to people, causing problems.

In the past, schools and homes have been evacuated because of the fumes. Thomas is one of the men surveying the caves to help the city deal with the fumes.

"Caves are wilderness areas — a nonrenewable resource." The tall, lean Thomas seemed concerned. "The life in them is fragilely balanced. It could be destroyed by careless dumping."

Caving as a hobby offers a special kind of release for members of the grotto. "When you're exploring, you're getting to know yourself," Thomas said. "You face your own fears and learn your own strengths.

"You're building your confidence, going through a 3-D maze and trying to remember where you've been," Thomas said, smiling through a wiry, brown beard. "For me, it's a real challenge. It's like exploring myself."

Caving was already Thomas's hobby when he came to Bowling Green in fall 1984 with his wife, Janice. Both were hired to map the caves under Bowling Green last summer by Dr. Nicholas Crawford, a professor of geography and geology at Western.

The Thomases moved from Arlington, Texas, so Janice could teach at Bowling Green Middle School. Woodrow drives a bus for Warren County Schools. Both are working toward degrees at Western — Woodrow toward a bachelor's in geography and geology, and Janice toward a master's in education.

"The concentration of caves and caving activity was a big factor" in their move to Bowling Green, said Thomas, who has been exploring caves for four years.

The Lost River cave system is one of two cave networks under the city. Lost River is a sanctuary for dangerous chemicals and gases, some of which are potentially explosive, Thomas said.

This year, Bowling Green gave Crawford and Western's Center for Caves and Karst Studies an $89,000 grant to map the caves and find the chemicals.

The city is on a karst-type landform, typified by caves, sinking streams, sinkholes and underground springs. No other city in the United States, perhaps in the world, is built on a sinkhole plain like Bowling Green is, Thomas said.

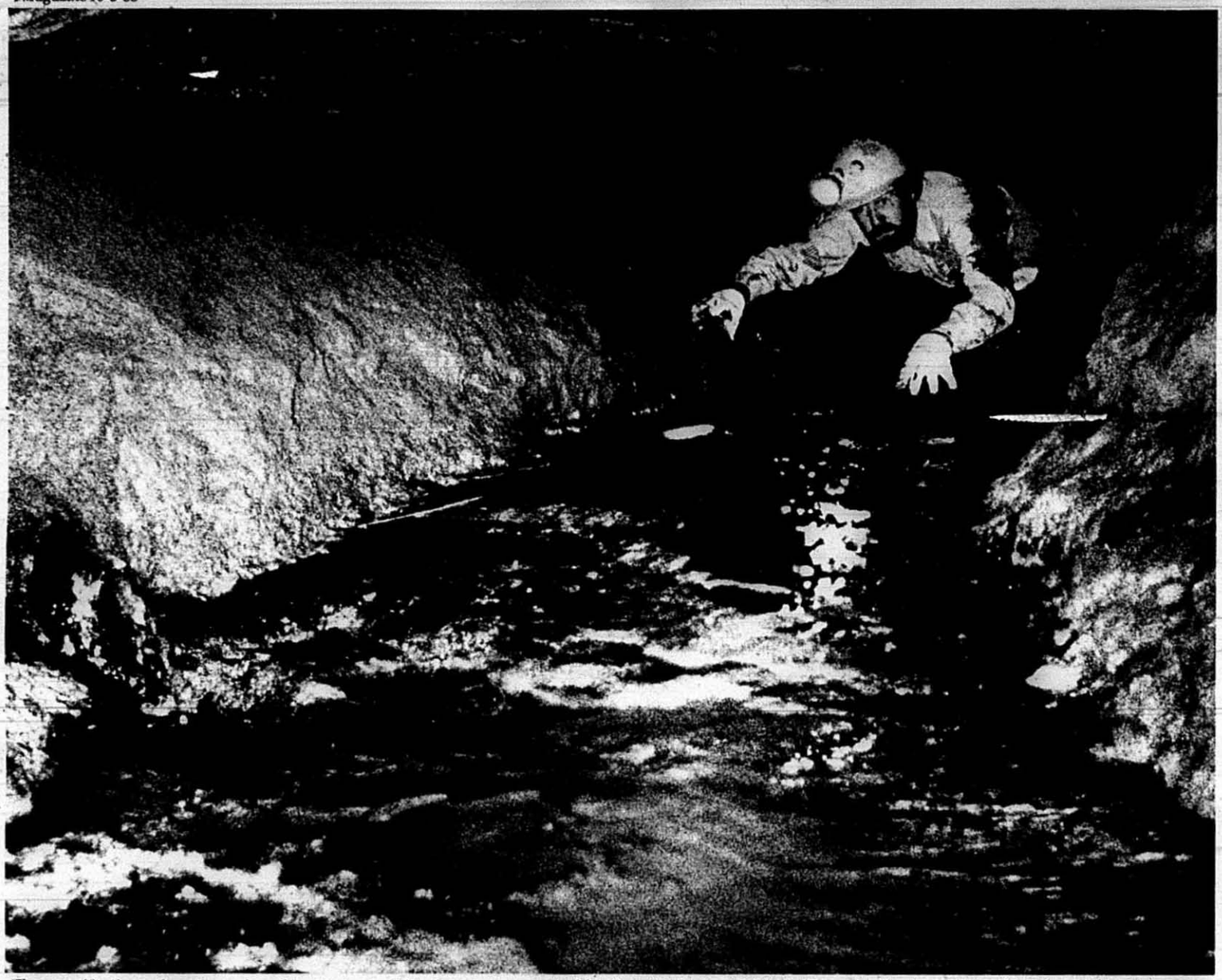
Building a city on a karst area is asking for trouble, grotto member Chris Groves

Continued on Page 4

(Above) Woodrow Thomas, a Bowling Green sophomore majoring in geology and geography, uses his head lamp to pierce the darkness ahead. (Left) James Wells, a Bowling Green senior majoring in geology, prepares to go on a nine-hour surveying trip with a friend.

Story by
MACK HUMPHREYS

Photos by
STEVE HANKS



Thomas sifts through water and mud inside the Lost Explorer's passage looking for a dye bug, which tests the water for dyes released in other parts of the cave.

Beneath Bowling Green Continued from Page 3

said. Underground gases, sinkhole flooding, groundwater pollution and sinkhole collapses are typical.

Groves, a graduate student from Washington, D.C., is the survey group's hydrologist. Although he works in the caves with Thomas, he also researches above-ground on the effects of karst landforms in heavily populated areas.

"A lot of the stuff that's going on around here is pretty rare," Groves said. "Most people in caving do it just for enjoyment," but in this case the cave network is a laboratory for students.

The opportunity to go to school near a primarily unexplored cave system is what drew Groves to Western. This is a unique place to study geography and geology because of Bowling Green's swift underground streams, he said.

Groundwater in a plateau cave region like Mammoth Cave may move only a few feet per year. But chemicals dumped in a Bowling Green sinkhole can travel miles underground in a day and reach the groundwater quickly.

"That means if there's a major spill somewhere of gasoline or whatever, theoretically, it's under the whole town overnight" because the system acts like an underground pipeline, Thomas said.

It's obvious that chemicals are already in the cave system from the smells and colored foam the surveyors find, Thomas said. But since the chemicals move when caught in floods, they are hard to clean up.

In the Big Bertha branch, near Nashville Road and Newman Way, of the Lost River caves, "there used to be scummy pools of orange, floating gunk. And now it's not there," Thomas said. "It has washed through — moved farther in."

Because sinkholes open up regularly, blocking passages, a huge section of cave is still hidden from the explorers. The chemicals are probably trapped there, Thomas said.

"We have to get there," Thomas said. "The center (for karst and cave studies) wants to thoroughly map the area so we can pinpoint where the fumes are going to gather." Last summer, Thomas and his coworkers spent about 30 hours a week, up to nine hours a day, searching for the unexplored Lost River caves.

"Bowling Green is a textbook case; no one has ever had this problem before," Thomas said. Bowling Green officials "don't know how to get down to the fumes."

> *'If there's a major spill somewhere of gasoline or whatever, theoretically, it's under the whole town overnight.'*
>
> —Woodrow Thomas

Chemical gas problems have concentrated in south and west sides of town. In the Forest Park area, some ventilation shafts have been drilled to get rid of the gas.

A karst area causes other problems, too. Sinkholes formed in the Greenwood Mall parking lot until 1983, when they were fixed, Groves said.

The center knows a large part of the cave is hidden because of the flow of underground streams and the formation of sinkholes. Water goes underground in one area, but re-emerges several miles away.

Lines of sinkholes along the surface also indicate that a cave system is underneath. When a sinkhole collapses into a cave passage, it's called a "breakdown."

When the new sections of the Lost River cave system are found, it will become one of the largest caves in the United States, Thomas said.

"That lost section of the cave is really what drives me on. It's like a puzzle, and it's beginning to fit together," Thomas said. No man has ever seen these caves,

and "that's exciting — when you can find it and be the first one through."

The Lost River system was mapped once, but that map ended at a breakdown. Later, a crawl space was found that went around that cave-in, leading to bigger passages.

On that trip, the party turned back because they started to feel sick. Tested samples of the scum revealed high concentrations of cancer-causing chemicals.

Sometimes chemicals will wash up to a high point during a flood and get trapped there.

'The last section of the cave is really what drives me on. It's like a puzzle and it's beginning to fit together.'

— Woodrow Thomas

Those tunnels go on, leading to another area blocked in the same way. "We know it goes on, but we haven't been able to get through to it yet," Thomas said.

"It makes you want to squeeze your body through holes smaller than you are to get to it."

Grotto surveyors find adventure in searching for the rest of the caves, despite frustrations along the way. "I couldn't say how close we are to finding" the unexplored caves, grotto member Don Metzner said. "Sometimes I get discouraged, but I'm not ready to give up yet."

Last summer, the Elizabethtown senior worked full time for Crawford as a cave explorer and surveyor. He's back in school and off the payroll, but he's still going into the caves.

A recent trip into the caves was fruitless. Despite hours of hard caving through wet passages, the surveyors didn't find the connecting passage they were looking for.

"That leaves really nasty, grim passages left to explore," Metzner said, sighing. By the time they reach the unexplored parts of the cave, they've been underground hours — walking, climbing and crawling.

"The mud's sticking to you and pulling you down," Metzner said. "It tires you out pretty bad." Some very small passages are left to be explored. Their entrances sometimes have to be dug open.

Despite all the dirt and hard work, "I hope I'm on the trip that does" find the right passage, Metzner said. "That'll be quite a day."

Thomas wasn't always drawn to the Lost River system. "I didn't have much interest in going into the Lost River when we moved here, because it was supposed to be so polluted," he said, smiling. "People would tell me things like, 'Oh, it's not so bad. Two or three weeks after you come out, the headaches go away.' "

Officials haven't been able to pinpoint who is polluting the caves. Thomas suspects the chemicals can be attributed to someone dumping in a sinkhole. Officials are in a quandary, trying to decide how to keep the chemicals out of the groundwater.

In one cave, the explorers discovered a gray fungus-like growth on the rocks. About the same time, a heavy petroleum smell filled the passage.

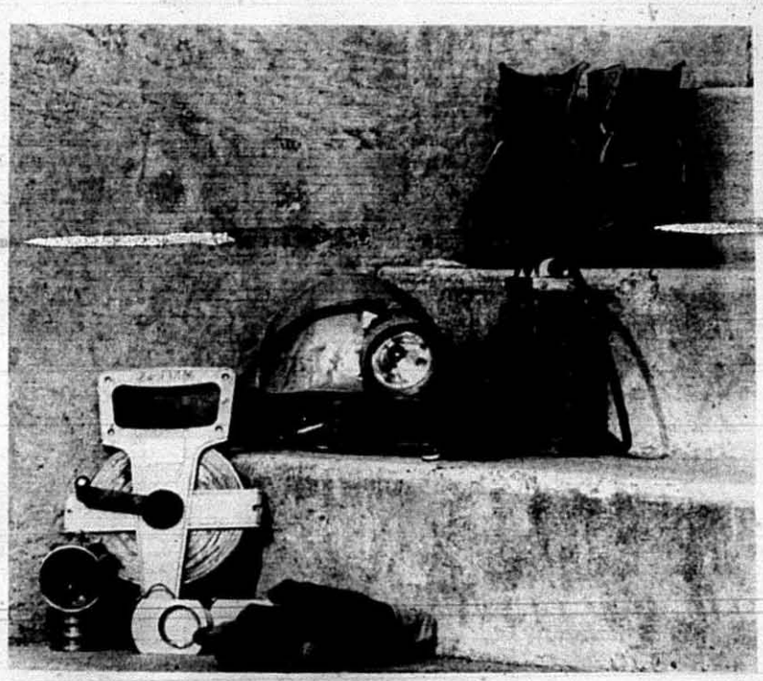
An orange scum was floating on the water. "I don't like that cave anymore," Thomas said. "The fumes are so bad in there I don't ever want to go back."

Once Janice Thomas and Grise Leach crawled ahead of the rest of the group with a measuring tape to measure distance and elevation. "They both started feeling lightheaded and kind of spaced-out and sick," Thomas said.

They realized they must have been near a trapped pool of chemicals and water. "We left and they felt better later," Thomas said. On another survey trip, the group mapped up to the other side of the trapped pool. Now they avoid it.

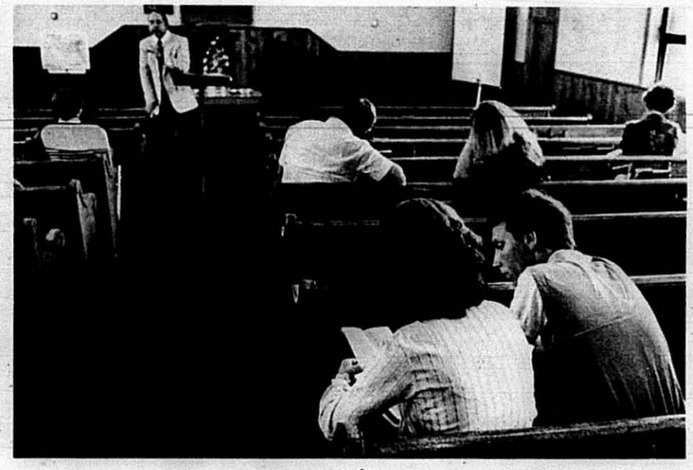
Despite the frustrations, even the dangers, Thomas said he won't stop until he finds the Lost River.

"And that's the whole business," Thomas said. "That's why we spend hours every weekend sliming through mud and water and squeezing through passages just to be the first to find it. It's an obsession." ■



Caving tools include surveying tape, head lamps, gloves, boots and helmets.

Thomas and his wife, Janice, talk about finding the unmapped region of the Lost River cave system.



(Far left) Cook takes a minute to pray before he begins the sermon. (Above left) As food services director, Cook checks the quality of the food in the pasta bar at the cafeteria in the Garrett Center and (above) helps store manager Mike Garrett price items after a delivery to the Pick-Up grocery in Pearce-Ford Tower. (Left) Ronnie Ward, a Smiths Grove freshman, shares a copy of the New Testament, with Dana Miller in the church.

Story by

VICTORIA P. MALMER

Photos by

JAMES BORCHUCK

As director of Food Services and a Church of Christ minister, Louis Cook serves . . .

Food for body, food for soul

On Sunday morning, Louis Cook puts on his best and, Bible in hand, arrives at Smiths Grove Church of Christ, where he serves as minister.

On Monday, Cook dons the coat of director of Food Services and returns to Western and his full-time job.

Cook, 45, says the transition from administrator to preacher is an easy one. "I'm a Christian all the time," he often says. "I just preach on Sundays."

But the goals are primarily the same. "Here at school, we try to provide palatable food for reasonable prices at convenient locations.

"At the church, we do the same thing, only the food is spiritual food — the Bread of Life."

He said both jobs are team efforts. "I'm just a team player, in the office and at the church," he said. "Everybody needs help, and the people I work with and go to church with are mine."

"I'm just the vehicle," he said shyly. "The message just comes through me."

"We try to get everyone involved in the work of the church," he said. "We want everyone to have a role in the church. That's our goal for the future."

The Smiths Grove Church of Christ meets in a small brick building, on a corner of the main drag of town about 15 miles north of Bowling Green. The sidewalk is cracked. The steps are worn. But members of the congregation say they have all they need.

"He has been so good for the church," said Phyllis Bessette, a 20-year church member and a Western financial aid adviser.

"He has given us direction and kept us thinking. I've been in this church a long time, and he's one of the best."

When Cook talks about his ministry, his dark eyes sparkle. He brushes thinning dark hair over an expanding shiny spot on the back of his head and says: "When I was young, 13 or so, I would practice church-speaking at my family church in Horse Cave.

"We had a youth ministry, and we took turns talking to the congregation. I think it kept me from developing that fear of public speaking that so many people get."

Through his childhood, Cook attended church regularly. He was reared in Horse Cave, graduating from high school in 1958 and joining the Army in 1962.

His three-year stint was with Air Defense Command, working with anti-aircraft missiles, he said. "We shot things out of the air if they weren't us."

He began working on campus as assistant director of Food Services in 1965 and began taking classes toward a degree in business administration in 1966.

Eleven years later, Cook received his degree after completing more than 108 credit hours at night.

His wife, Pat, is a receptionist in the financial aid office. They've been married since 1962.

"This church means a lot to Louis," Pat Cook said. "He's been doing it so long, he wouldn't want to do much else."

His son Todd, 21, works in the campus credit union and takes classes part time. Kami, Cook's 18-year-old daughter, works for a local drug store and hasn't decided if she wants to go to college.

Cook said his children attend 12th Street Church of Christ, where their uncle, interim president Paul Cook, serves as an elder. "They have minds of their own," Cook explained. "And Smiths Grove is a long way to drive since they're used to that church."

In his spare time, Louis plays golf, raises a garden, works in his yard and plays Spades and Rook with his wife and their friends.

'Here at school, we try to provide palatable food . . . At the church, we do the same thing, only the food is spiritual food — the Bread of Life.'

— Louis Cook

Cook said his two jobs complement each other and never overlap. "I don't teach Sunday school at work, nor do I talk food service at church. Smiths Grove and I have been good for each other. It's a wonderful opportunity."

On Sundays, Louis and his wife drive from Bowling Green, arriving at about 9:15 a.m. Old men stand outside the building smoking, waiting to shake hands and talk to Cook before Sunday school begins at 9:30 a.m.

"This is a dedicated congregation," Cook says quietly, surveying the group. "They attend regularly and believe fervently. They care about this church and each other."

As minister, Cook's duties include "marryin', buryin' and visitin' the sick," in addition to preaching on Sundays, Bible study classes on Wednesday nights and holding an occasional revival or dinner on the grounds.

"It's an old-fashioned kind of church," he said. "We're not forward-thinking or modern. We're a nice little country church, and we do things pretty much as always."

The Smiths Grove church is rich with tradition, dating from its founding in 1951. One of Cook's favorite parts of the Sunday night program is when the children lead the congregation in a classic hymn.

"They have such beautiful, angelic voices," he said. "It's a wonderful tradition that's been going on since the church started, I guess."

Cook also counsels individual church members about religious and personal problems. "You're supposed to be wise, as a church leader," he said. "People look to you for counseling and help, and sometimes you don't know what they should do.

"But you try your best and pray God is watching and helping you make the right decisions. That's all you can do."

He asks the smokers outside about a sick church member. "How is she? Do

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During the sermon, Cook stresses a point to his congregation.

Food for body, food for soul

Continued from Page 7

you know what room she's in, in the hospital? Do you think she's up to visitors?" he says. He jots down her name in a notebook that he carries in his shirt pocket so he can visit after work next week.

The group swells and ebbs until 9:30 a.m., when Sunday school begins. Then the tide of 50 people moves inside, talking quietly about their children, jobs and local gossip. Herding in the flock is Brother Cook, who carries a "How to Preach" textbook under his arm.

Inside, he begins the devotional on a hymn and a prayer. The group then forms five study groups in different parts of the church.

"Freedom from Sin" is the topic of the lesson. "We need to walk in safety," Cook tells the faithful. "We have available to us a clear path, free of stumbling blocks, on which we can walk in truth, toward God."

A devil's advocate argues with Cook from the pew. "Are we free from sin?" he asks baitingly. The minister patiently explains that none are free from sin, but anyone can avoid being "seduced along the path."

After Sunday school, the men file outside for cigarettes. Cook passes through the flock, patting babies' heads and horsing around with young boys.

"About a quarter of the congregation is children," he said. "It gives you some hope for the future. I've seen churches where everyone was 65 and older, and you just watch the church dry up and blow away."

"Young people breathe life into the place."

Inside, the sanctuary is ready for the main service. Waist-high polished pine paneling meets pale green walls, and a slope of forest green carpet covers the floor under 18 pews to the altar.

The walls are bare, and frosted glass windows substitute for traditional stained glass. An arrangement of pink silk flowers on the altar is the only decoration.

On an easel by the altar hangs a collection of maps, which he uses to point out places mentioned in Bible readings. Cook writes key words during his sermon on a green chalkboard sitting squarely behind the pulpit.

Next to the chalkboard, a wooden plaque reads: "Register of attendance and offering." Last week's offering was $207, and 49 people attended. The record attendance, 71, and attendance and offering for a year ago today are also listed.

He seems interested, shyly enthusiastic, about the sermon. He is almost unaware of the crowd as he speaks.

"You're kind of oblivious to what's going on while you're preaching," he said. "I watch facial expression, but I try not to see everything that goes on. It can be distracting."

In the fifth row from the back, small children fidget and play with a red toy tractor during the lesson.

Women stir breezes in the warm little church — fluttering wood-handled cardboard fans from Hardy and Son Funeral Chapels.

Torn, yellow pages of the Gospel of St. Mark litter the first pews and floor. Jesus' words are in red, and important passages are underlined.

"Church of Christ uses the Bible as its sole authority," Cook said. "We use no creeds or doctrines beyond that."

He has served the Smiths Grove congregation since July 1984. Before that, he and Pat were members of 12th Street Church of Christ.

In 1982, he served Ray's Branch Church of Christ in Richardsville and before that, he served Sugar Grove Church of Christ near Morgantown for two years until 1972. His first "call" was to East Side Church of Christ in Bowling Green, in 1965. The Church was new and needed volunteer evangelists until a full-time minister could be found.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity to preach at Smiths Grove," he said. "They can't afford to support an evangelist full time, and my work with the university is very important to me.

"The food service job is flexible. I can leave work to preach a funeral usually, if I need to."

His job as director of Food Services entails planning, hiring, and paper work.

When customers have complaints, they call the director. He also helps plan large catering jobs, menus and overall service.

"I'm very proud of our work in Food Services," Cook said. "We've made a lot of strides: Supercard, the Pick-Up, and more. We put a lot of heart into our work here, and I think it shows."

"Paper shuffling" is his least favorite part of the job.

"But I love my work here," Cook said. "I couldn't imagine doing much else."

"I guess my gift for gab got me into this," Cook said of his ministry. "Both jobs mean a lot to me, but I guess I've been blessed in this area." ■

'You're kind of oblivious to what's going on while you're preaching. I watch facial expression, but I try not to see everything that goes on. It can be distracting.'

— Louis Cook

After the service, Cook gives a hug to 3-year-old Kenneitha London. About one-third of the congregation is children.

Constantly occupied with thoughts of Vietnam, Bob Dalton Buster talks about coming to grips with his war experiences.

Sixteen years after returning from Vietnam, a war veteran is . . . Coming home

Story by STEVE THOMAS • Photos by T.J. HAMILTON

If you're wounded in your third month, you don't burn any more villes, you don't see any more death, you're not asked to do terrible things in the name of your country.

—taken from unpublished writings of Bob Dalton Buster, a Vietnam War veteran

The boy of war is 37.

"Who do you think will win the pennant?" he asks, trying to make conversation. "A cold beer sure would taste nice."

He drifts from subject to subject and explains, "See, I'm no different than anyone else. I think of other things besides the war."

Just then someone walks by and makes a comment. Buster replies, "Oh, that reminds me of back in the Nam when . . ."

Long strands of thinning, brown hair hang lifelessly below his ears, as does his short haggard beard. His small hands are calloused, and the hide is tough and aged like old leather gloves.

Shrapnel scars dot the backs of his lean arms. The eyes are blue — youthful blue — but the whites are bloodshot from years of worry, little sleep, drugs and alcohol.

"I've gone days without talking about it because I lived alone," Buster said. "I don't think my cat would've been too interested. I've never gone a day without thinking about it.

"When I wake up in the morning, I have to sit up with a cigarette and a cup of coffee for 20 minutes to let the discs in my back get used to being upright," he said. "That's a living reminder of the Nam.

"I don't think anyone in Vietnam who was a teenager doesn't think about it in some way. I don't think we should forget."

Buster was 19 years old in 1968 when he donned a blue Marine uniform. But military uniforms and colors were nothing new for him.

'I believed in hot dogs, apple pie and America. . . . I never dreamed it could be wrong.'

—Bob Dalton Buster

His father was a career Navy man. Buster was born on a naval base and lived on several during his first 13 years.

"I believed in hot dogs, apple pie and America," he said. "I guess I was the All-American boy. I believed the American way was the only way. I never dreamed it could be wrong." He said even the South Vietnamese didn't seem to want or support America's involvement in the conflict.

Buster came to Bowling Green in 1964 and graduated two years later from Bowling Green High, where he earned a reputation for being level-headed and smart.

He was a standout at football, gaining All-Southern Kentucky honors as a lineman, but he turned down several athletic scholarships and opted to study at Western. However, Buster was restless, and less than two years later he dropped out and joined "the lean, mean fighting machine."

"I remember when I was in Marine boot camp. I was saluting ushers and nuns and cops — and probably a band member," he said. "I was proud to be a Marine.

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Coming home

Continued from Page 9

"I remember my drill instructor took our platoon out the night after we graduated and marched us in the moonlight. We had been a bunch of idiots 14 weeks before, and we had 82 heels hitting at the same time on every command. We did it perfect, man. I saw him (the drill instructor) in the moonlight, and I swear a tear was glistening in his eye. He'd been to the Nam. He knew what it was like."

So would Buster.

A long time — I've been here a long time and have a long, long time to go.

It's just cigarettes, humping, jungle rot, wet feet, fear, leeches, flies, rats, sandbags, death, body counts, C-rations, mail call, booby traps, napalm, burning villages, barbed wire, bunkers, guns, guns, guns and occasionally a beer.

July 15, 1968.

In less than a year, man would walk on the moon and Woodstock would rock the world. Bob Dalton Buster took his first step in Vietnam.

He was there about 10 months — "enough to mess you up for the rest of your life."

"There was enough pain, destruction and death to satisfy any sadistic human," he said. "You see things that . . . will affect you. They have elephantiasis over there, and you would see people with clefts that weren't repaired surgically."

He remembers one February morning pulling about 75 Vietnamese bodies out of a cave. The enemy was trying to keep the Americans from knowing how many they had killed. "They'd been in there just long enough that if you pulled too hard you'd come out with only an arm," he said.

"You're spending millions and billions of dollars on this war, and people in the cities (are) without basic health care as we see it."

He said he had just arrived in Vietnam when he was told to take trash to a dump.

"I saw these kids up in the dump," he said. "We've got laws in this country that make it illegal to treat animals that way. Kids were up there in tin cans and barbed wire running around barefooted — starving kids or kids blown up."

But Buster said after awhile it was hard to have feelings for anyone in Vietnam — even the children.

"In Vietnam you didn't dare have a child come up to you," he said. "There was an incident in Saigon where a couple of kids went into an officer's hotel and wounded and hurt many, many people." The children were armed with packs of explosives, he said. "When the children are the enemy, it's a pretty distorted situation."

He said the most common saying in his unit, nicknamed the "Walking Dead," was "Kill a commie for Christ, and napalm sticks to kids."

"I think for most guys, you start out with some kind of world sensibilities," he said. "After so many of your partners get their legs and arms blown off, you think of them all as the enemy — all Viet Cong.

"You can't afford to walk point (lead) in your platoon and think about the ville you burned yesterday," Buster said. "Somehow to survive you have to wall yourself off."

He said the village burnings are some of the most unforgettable incidents.

"We were usually just sent in and told to torch it," he said. "Usually the people had been sent to a relocation camp, but always 10 to 15 percent of them would sneak off and they would stand back and watch you burn that ville. You knew they were there. You could feel their hatred."

Buster said some of the men he was with "went out on what was called the 'ragged edge' and didn't come back. Somedays, some of these guys would go crazy and start shooting chickens and pigs and anything else that moved."

Buster said he participated in about 12 major village burnings and about 15 smaller burnings in which the Vietnamese were thought to be harboring the enemy. One incident still haunts him.

An old woman with a baby ran up and grabbed his arm and pleaded with him, "No burn my house. No burn my house."

"I told her, 'There's only two truths in Vietnam today, babe. This is an ancestral home, and it's burn city. They'll burn it from the sea, they'll burn it from the sky, or they'll burn it from the ground. There ain't nothin' I can do.'

"That has bothered me for a long, long time."

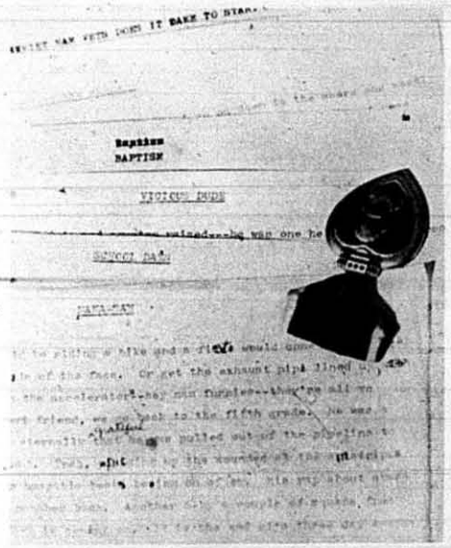
Many men returning from Vietnam suffered delayed stress. Buster said he had immediate stress.

"My first reaction was just to block it all out and forget, but that didn't work," he said. "I'm not proud of what I did over there. I'm not proud of the villages I burned and the people I killed. I did what I had to, to survive.

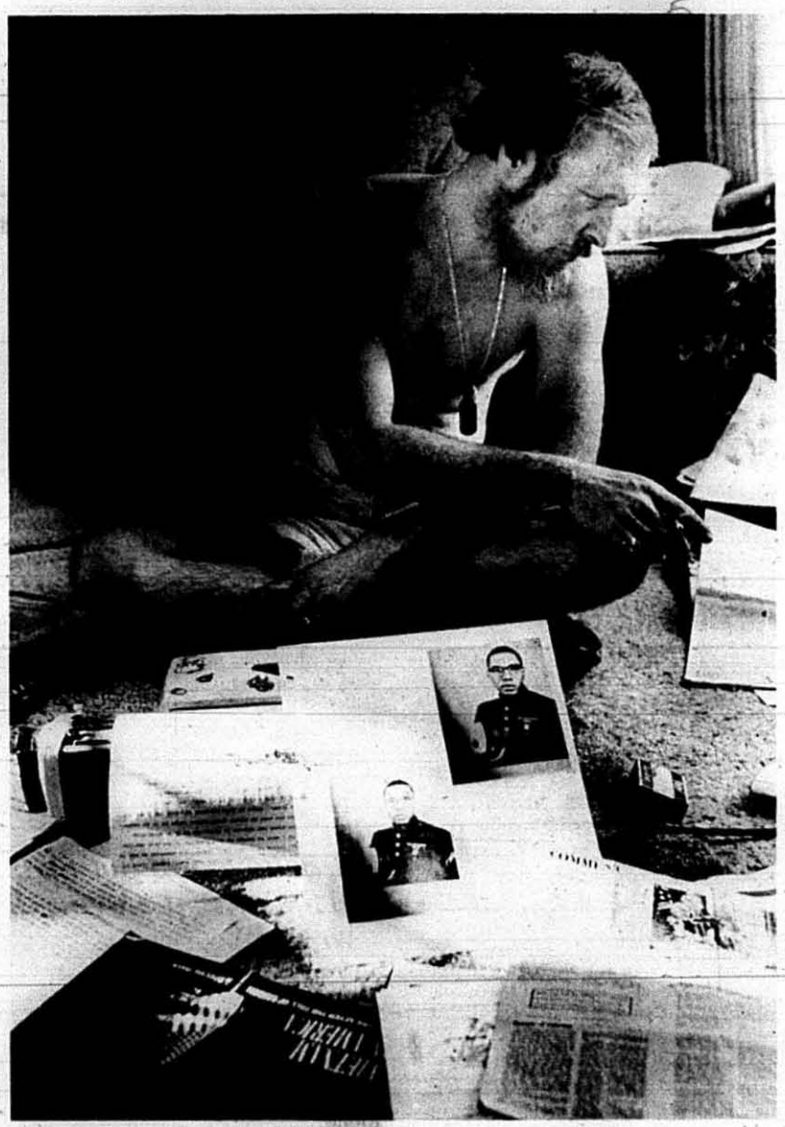
"Many men come home and drink after a war," he said. "I did. And you do it because when you drink you don't dream. It took me years to understand this."

Buster said he often wonders if those who survived the fighting are the lucky ones.

"I am the man that lives the waking dream," Buster said. "Sometimes my dreams are more secure than when I'm awake."



(Left) Buster's Purple Heart medal, which is the only one he didn't throw on the White House steps in 1971, rests on some of his unpublished manuscript, "GRUNT."



Buster sits at his typewriter while looking at photos of his best friend, David Cherry Jr., who was killed in the war.

I dream of being shot. I think of shooting myself. I had a friend who did just that — a .22 bullet right between the eyes. Sometimes I can hear it, almost feel it — metal smashing through bone.

Buster said many fighting Americans would do anything to come home, including shooting themselves.

Buster said he thought of it several times, but "I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

Most of them prayed, he said, and looked for the "million dollar wound," an injury that would get them released but not cripple them. He said he remembers one Marine walking in front of him as they crossed a river. The Marine stuck his foot under the track of an armored personnel carrier.

His foot was crushed, but he got to go home.

Buster didn't quite get the "million dollar wound," but he did "come home intact rather than tacked in."

One night, a Marine walking next to Buster asked him for a cigarette. As the Marine walked away, he tripped a booby trap. Buster said he remembers being struck in the back by metal and feeling his nose smashed into his face from the impact of his M-16 rifle.

He woke up in a hospital in DaNang — both knees shattered, part of a thigh missing, shrapnel in his limbs and a shattered nose. His flak jacket and helmet had saved him, but he'd been wounded physically and mentally.

The fingers on his left hand are gnarled and barely movable from the flying metal that cut through tendons. He also has torn cartilage in one knee and pieces of shrapnel in the other.

Buster came "back to the world" Aug. 3, 1969, but in many ways, he is still coming home.

He just completed a book which is as yet unpublished, containing vignettes of his experiences and emotions of Vietnam now, then and in between.

He said he calls the book "GRUNT," which was what the Marines who fought called themselves because of the difficult conditions. The book contains articles about Buster isolating himself in the backwoods of Florida for almost 10 years, tossing his medals on the steps of the White House along with several other veterans in 1971, and numerous articles of death and destruction in Vietnam. Buster said writing the book has finally made him "turn and face the dragon" and go on with his life.

He had written before, but last year he started writing heavily after riding 13,500 miles on his bicycle, signifying the distance from Vietnam to the United States. Writing the book has helped him rid himself of many built-up feelings, he said. The most important was facing up to the death of his best friend.

David Cherry Jr., a 19-year-old Marine from Woodlawn, N.C., whom Buster met the first day he arrived in Vietnam, was killed a day and a half after Buster was wounded. A lieutenant came to see Buster in the hospital and walked out after saying three words: "Cherry is dead."

Buster said he and Cherry had talked of getting together after the war and staying friends forever. But war has a way of killing dreams.

"We probably always knew, between me and him, that we both couldn't make it. I want people to know that something terribly fine was sacrificed (in Vietnam).

"He was black. I was white. He was big. I was little. He was quiet. I was the platoon funny-man that never shut up. We made a perfect match," he said.

"Me and Cherry came over together, fought together and, by God, we should have left together."

'Me and Cherry came over together, fought together and, by God, we should have left together.'

—Bob Dalton Buster

I lay on an operating table and Cherry was about to die. How much of the American youth had been fed to the meat machine by May 11, 1969? . . . I lay in bed earlier and tried to remember what it was like to have knees and a right thigh that was there like the rest of the body. Tried to remember having that good American attitude.

"I was not a killer. Cherry was not a killer," Buster said. "We were just doing our duty. We were all being pushed into

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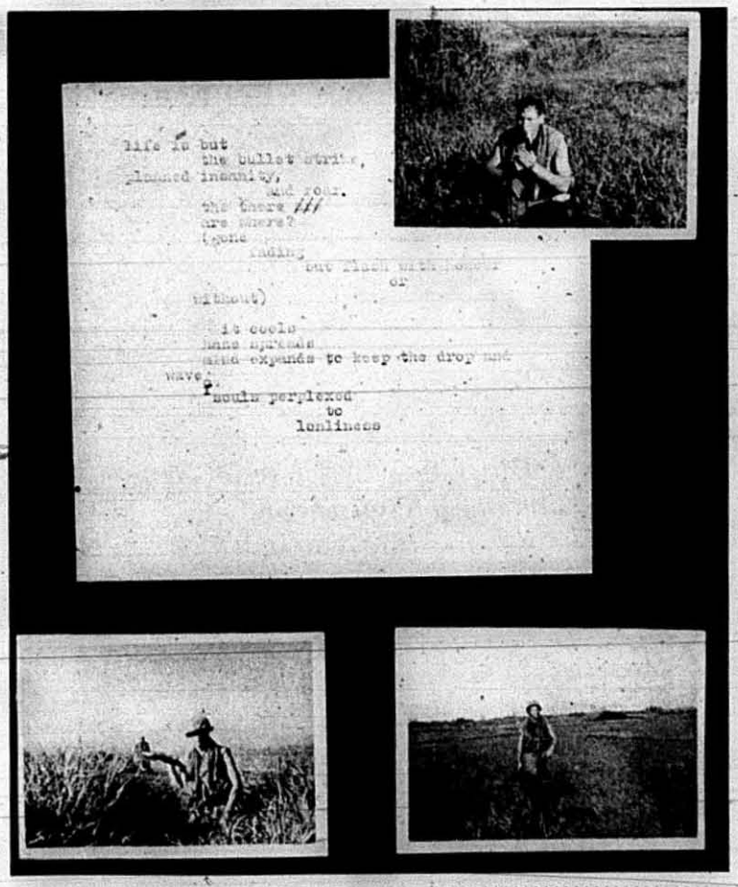
During his tour in Vietnam, Buster usually found time to write poetry and letters.



(Left) In Buster's photo album, a poem that he wrote during the war shows his distress about the violence and death. (Above) Buster takes time out from the war to pose for a picture with a fellow Marine, whom he called "Terrible Tom the Tattooed Tramp."

Photos on this page courtesy of Bob Dalton Buster.

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something that didn't have anything to do with defending America.

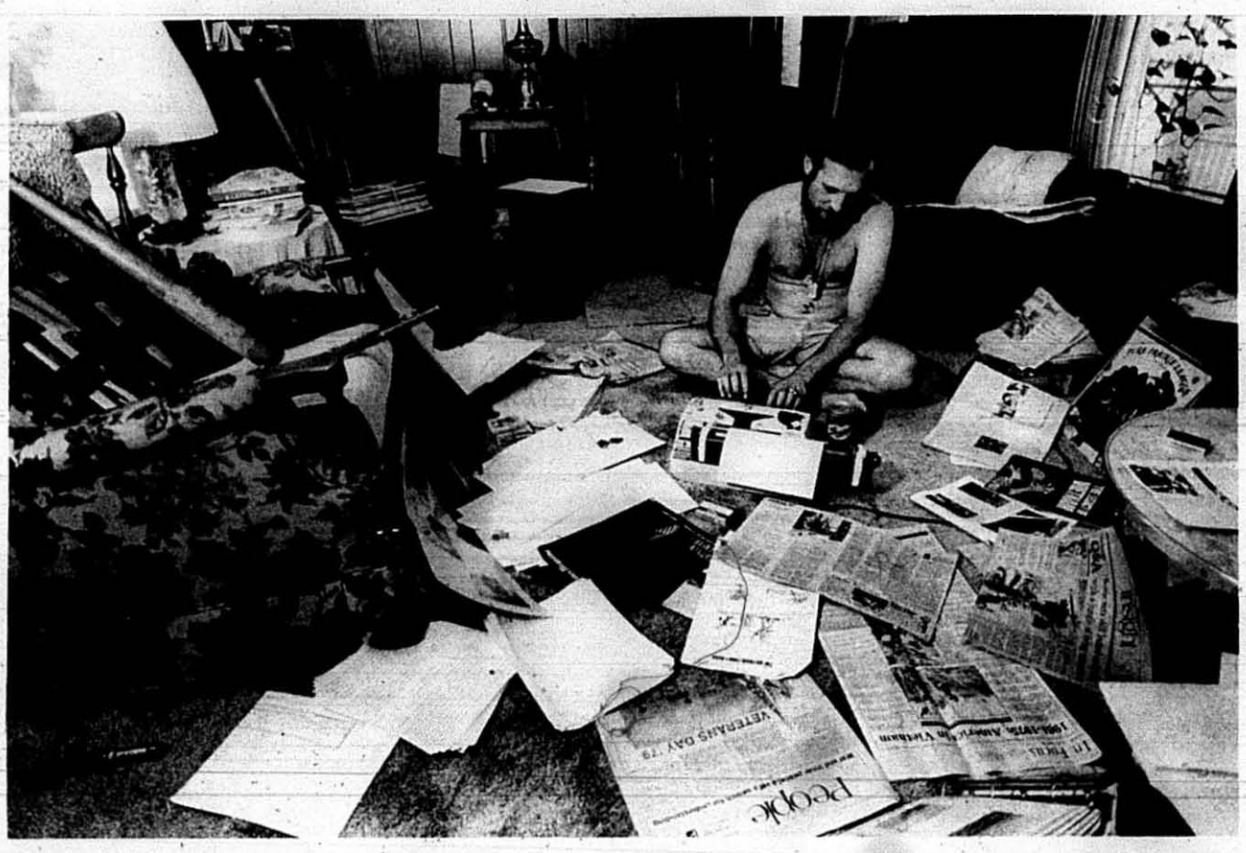
"Vietnam laid out all that was wrong with America for all to see," he said. "I love America, but there just wasn't enough reason for fighting in Vietnam."

Buster wants to get away from the reminders of the war for a while.

"When I completely finish the book, I think I'm going to take all my old pictures and albums and put them away for a while and go on with my life. I want to play baseball and take a girl to the hop."

But getting away from the reminders doesn't mean rejecting the memories. "To reject Vietnam is to reject who and what I am," he said.

"Finally, I'm coming home." ■



Buster tries to inspire his writings with clippings, childhood toys and war memorabilia as he sits in his mother's trailer in Bowling Green.